

Adult Learners and Public Libraries

Linda Ashcroft

L.S.Ashcroft@ljmu.ac.uk

Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool Business School, UK

Abstract

The UK Government's ten year strategic vision for public libraries in England was defined in *Framework for the Future*, which set out current strengths and key areas for development for public libraries in supporting lifelong learning, and the benefits to be gained from public libraries working in partnership with other organisations. It describes the role of public libraries in providing a flexible and supportive environment for adult learners and the importance of allowing users to learn 'at their own pace, without having to study for a qualification'. A study for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) undertaken by a team at Liverpool John Moores University reported on the first phase of a project on public library provision for adult learners. Library services sampled in the study have all established good relationships and reciprocal arrangements with a wide range of partners to provide adult learning services. A wide range of courses and services is provided, some of which will have a broad appeal to all learner groups, and others, which are targeted to a particular community. Some courses entice new learners and others continue to engage people in the learning process. This works towards social inclusion and bridging the digital divide. All library services sampled expressed the desire to provide an appropriate environment for learners. Public libraries use a variety of methods to promote adult learning services, but acknowledge that promotion needs to be more sophisticated and informed by market research undertaken within particular communities.

Introduction

Framework for the Future (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003) defines the UK Government's ten year strategic vision for public libraries in England, and sets out current strengths and key areas for development for public libraries in supporting lifelong learning. It discusses the considerable benefits to be gained from public libraries working in partnership with other organisations. Partnerships might also be forged regionally, to help build links between libraries and formal adult learning service providers (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003, p.13).

The report calls for public libraries to be distinctive: "[public libraries] should not duplicate the efforts of other public and private sector providers but complement them through partnership working" (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003, p.7). It also recognises that a key strength that public libraries have is their position within local communities, and their sense of local connection (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003, p.43). It describes the role of public libraries in providing a flexible and supportive environment for adult learners and the importance of allowing users to learn "at their own pace, without having to study for a qualification" (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003).

A study for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) undertaken by a team at Liverpool John Moores University reported on the first phase of a project on public library provision for adult learners (Ashcroft et al, 2005).

Methodology

Methodology comprised a comprehensive literature review, and semi-structured interviews with public library officials. A purposive select sample of 6 public library services in England was identified. The sample was selected to cover the following criteria: geographical location; type of library service (such as county, city, borough); Beaconⁱ and non-Beacon library services. Data on non-library providers of adult learning services were gathered primarily from a search of websites of select non-library providers of adult learning services and from a review of the documentation acquired.

Adult learning groups

None of the library services sampled worked to a definition of adult learning. Some difficulties lie with the definition of an 'adult'. The age of an 'adult' can vary according to different purposes. For example, four library services defined adults as over 16, as this age is set in line with funding requirements set by the Learning Skills Council. One library service defines adults as over 18, which is because the teenage library card runs from 11 to 18. Another library service defined adults as over 19 because learndirect (<http://www.learndirect.co.uk>) courses start from the age of 19 (Ashcroft, Farrow & Watts, 2006).

Many adult learner groups were specified by the public libraries sampled. The first 4 in the following list were those most frequently cited, but the term 'hard to reach groups' was cited by all and encompasses the other terms.

- Ethnic minorities
- Job seekers
- Prisoners
- Older people
- Travellers
- Homeless
- Refugees
- Asylum seekers
- Single mothers
- Rural 'deprived'
- Families

Despite some commonalities, different services chose to specify different groups – perhaps because of particular initiatives at the time of the study.

Four of the library services sampled specified 'older' people as adult learners, and one respondent said that older users made up the majority of their adult learners. Whilst one respondent said that older users may be more likely to respond to learning opportunities, such as "Silver Surfer" courses, another respondent suggested that some older people, who have not grown up using libraries, may not realise that learning opportunities and facilities are made available in libraries.

Some adult learners may be new 'tentative' learners. New learners often respond to powerful topics, such as the availability of computers, usually available in public libraries through the

People's Network (<http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk>). First impressions are seen as crucial for this group, and libraries are keen to provide a welcoming and supportive environment to ensure that such users feel comfortable in their early learning experience.

Learning provision

Framework for the Future proposes a vision for public libraries where they support people at all stages in their lives in reading, learning, finding information, etc, and points to a key strength of public libraries as operating as 'community centres of formal and informal learning' (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003, p.6).

The difficulty in specifying a clear distinction between formal and informal learning was reinforced by information recorded from the interviews (Ashcroft, Farrow & Watts, 2007). Respondents were well aware of this grey area between informal and formal learning provision, with one respondent commenting "where do you draw the line?". Respondents emphasised that, while adult learning services are currently high on the strategic agenda, adult learning has always been part of public library provision.

'Libraries ... have always had an important role right at the heart of the community in supporting adult learners; one-to-one, informal support that has been the bedrock of all library provision.'

'Libraries have always been used for learning, because people turn to libraries...individuals, especially those individuals who are not doing a formal course of learning or are not connected to an academic institution of some kind, school, college or whatever...People are doing research, following their own particular interest and are learning - whether they use a computer or a book. There's a vast amount of learning that goes on in libraries ...'.

Some respondents stressed that there is an emphasis within their organisation on informal adult learning provision, and that this is top of their agenda in developing adult learning services. For example, one respondent commented that "libraries should concentrate on informal, non-accredited courses. Colleges get more funding for more formal learning. Libraries are seen as the heart of the community and as resource centres". However, other respondents mentioned supporting learners in both informal and formal ways, with formal education usually being offered in partnership with other learning providers. Respondents from two library services expressed a desire to provide a 'seamless service' between informal and formal learning for their users, which could be achieved through providing formal learning services in-house, or through library staff having the appropriate knowledge to signpost other learning providers.

'Libraries have always been equipped to answer general enquiries. Sometimes they are equipped to resolve enquiries. Other times we are not the best organisation to answer questions and we would comfortably refer or signpost people to other sources or other organisations to answer enquiries. This is a function that we have always carried out and I don't feel that there is a great deal of difference. If someone comes in and is asking for advice then we can point them in the right direction. If they are wanting to go further, then you are signposting. When advice becomes guidance is where we would call in support organisations.'

Respondents were particularly keen to highlight a variety of the adult learning services that they provide. Those highlighted during interviews were:

- short introductory courses and taster sessions on a variety of topics, eg First Steps
- ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses (provided in partnership)
- Beatles courses
- Birmingham Pride
- tracing your family tree
- silver surfers
- University of the Third Age (partner organisation)
- writing a good CV
- job applications
- Open University help desk.

It is apparent from the range of courses on offer that some are designed with the particular community in mind, for example 'Birmingham Pride' and 'Beatles courses'. These also provide a way by which to entice new learners. Other courses are evident throughout the library services sampled, for example those related to job seeking, which are likely to generate appeal to a broader range of adult learners.

Respondents from two services referred to a continuing demand for computer basic skills courses. One respondent said that one-to-one approaches to learning were no longer sustainable and that they were moving towards a small group approach. Another respondent mentioned that they would like to offer more specialised levels of IT services, and there does appear to be demand for these.

The following are examples of the computer skills/ IT services available throughout one library service:

- A range of bite size taster sessions and IT courses are offered within libraries in partnership with easypc4all (<http://www.easypc4all.co.uk>).
- Local libraries provide free Internet and online services, Internet training and email for beginners.
- Older and Bolder IT courses for 50+ age group are held at 2 libraries in partnership with Bromley Adult education College.
- Computer Clubs in 4 libraries.
- Web for Business courses held at designated libraries.
- Bromley Training Truck, a mobile IT training facility offers introductory IT and basic skills courses in areas of rural deprivation.

Outreach targeted at particular groups provided evidence of working towards social inclusion, such as 'Black Families Reading Group', 'Connecting Identities', 'Routes to Reading', 'Black History Month', 'Refugee Week' and 'E-street partnership with 2 day centres to provide learning opportunities for homeless people'.

Partnerships

What is apparent from some of the above examples is that public libraries are working in partnership with other agencies to provide these services. The study illuminated other examples of these partnerships. learndirect was the most commonly cited of such services, and many others were partnerships with local colleges, such as college courses available in libraries, or partnerships between libraries services and/or district councils, an example of

which is Community Learning Access Points - a partnership between two district councils and Cambridgeshire Library Services, which are located in community venues and looked after by a community volunteer and with support from a learning tutor provided by the library services' e-learning network. A similar type of partnership is the Library and Knowledge Centre, a joint effort between Lancashire County Council and Preston City Council currently in the planning stage to provide state-of-the-art information, learning, knowledge, community and business development facilities. Furthermore, libraries of different types (such as public and academic) work together to provide learning opportunities, such as Libraries Together: Liverpool Learning Partnership - any person with a library card has access rights to the 6 libraries (pubic and academic) within this partnership.

The good relationships and reciprocal arrangements established with these partners go beyond provision and encompass sharing costs, facilities and marketing. Respondents reported on the use of library space by partner organisations. One service has a dedicated adult learning room within their city centre library that is used by partner organisations, such as The Lifelong Learning Service (<http://www.lifelonglearninguk.org>). The same service also runs a number of Drop In Study Centres (DISCs) which are located in libraries - or in the same building as libraries - and run in partnership with community colleges. Another service runs and staffs learning centres within a number of its libraries. An example was also given in which the local further education college has funded some refurbishment in a library and has a room within that library for delivering courses from the college.

Interviewees in the McNicol and Dalton (2003) study suggest that some learners may be more willing to admit to having difficulties in using computers rather than other learning needs, such as basic skills. This is reinforced to some extent by respondents from this MLA study, who commented that there continues to be a large demand for basic skills in computer and Internet use. Once new learners begin to use library services, library staff can potentially recognise basic skills needs, and are then able to channel new learners on to other - potentially more formal - learning. Similarly, open days and taster sessions may stimulate new learners to progress on to other adult learning, whether this is provided by library services or by partner organisations. However, first impressions are seen as crucial for this group, and libraries are keen to provide a welcoming and supportive environment to ensure that such users feel comfortable in their early learning experience.

Environment

The House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2005) report into public libraries calls for an action plan to provide substantial investment in public library buildings. This point was reinforced by respondents concerned regarding the position and condition of some libraries. Many libraries are not located in the best position within their communities, perhaps on account of new commercial developments being located away from town centres. Some libraries are too small, and insufficient seating room was reported. The space issue has become prominent with the introduction of the People's Network, with PCs taking space previously occupied by other materials. Some library buildings are in poor condition and lack appropriate facilities such as adequate toilets, car parking and refreshment services. One respondent commented on the desire to 'upgrade people's experience of libraries', and this can, in part, relate to the condition of the library building and the facilities available.

McNicol and Dalton (2003, p.20) reported that their interviewees discussed a library environment that provides 'a relaxed introduction to learning'. A common theme from the literature was that the library itself should act as a unique, neutral environment where all

sections of the community feel comfortable, have access to supported and mentored, flexible learning. Respondents in this MLA study expressed the desire to provide an appropriate environment for learners. One respondent commented on the provision of an environment that puts users on the road to learning without them realising it.

The provision of an appropriate environment for adult learners raises issues including the condition of buildings and adequacy of facilities. This can devolve to the basics of adequate funding, which also affects having sufficient staff who are trained to welcome and support learners and to contribute to a friendly ambience and to provide services outside the mainstream.

However, adult learning services are provided in a variety of locations. One respondent said that their adult learning services had, to date, been provided within the library. Locations mentioned by other respondents included learning centres within libraries, drop-in centres within or nearby libraries, library access points (these are PCs in cafes, post offices and public houses) and Electronic Village Halls (which are IT suites offering drop-in access facilitated by library staff). Adult learning is also provided via mobile library services and distance learners are also supported.

Promotion

Library services use a variety of methods to promote adult learning services, including posters and leaflets in libraries, posters and leaflets in partner organisation centres and website promotions. Yet any promotional method needs to be geared to a specific target in order to be effective. Some of the adult learner groups identified by respondents, such as the socially excluded, ethnic minorities, homeless people and young offenders, are unlikely to be all attracted by the same promotional technique. One respondent said that it was trying to become more sophisticated in its approach to promoting adult learning services, through targeting specific user groups with particular needs. Respondents identified just a few groups which had been specifically targeted. New learners formed one such group – albeit a rather broad grouping. Respondents identified a possible need to reduce jargon and acronyms that exist around learning, as these may be confusing and make the learning agenda difficult to explain – consequently these will affect any promotional initiatives. ALI (Adult Learning Inspectorate) suggests that one of the ways in which information about adult learning is disseminated to potential learners is via translation into community languages (Adult Learning Inspectorate, 2004). Cultural barriers may hinder some adult learner groups from using library services. For example, immigrants may not have similar services in their home countries, and not be aware that libraries offer services that are responsive to users' needs, such as providing newspapers in home languages. ALI also suggests that outreach workers can be used to invite members of the community (in cafes, post offices, etc) to gauge potential learner interests and contribute to community profiling (Adult Learning Inspectorate, 2004). Thus it seems that, generally, more specifically targeted methods of awareness-raising and promotion may be required.

Family learning is another way of attracting adult learners and promoting the skills for life agenda. An investigation of current provision and ongoing development of family learning services in UK public libraries indicated a range of family learning activities – ICT, homework support, family history, literacy, numeracy, reader development, arts and crafts, with ICT being the most common type of learning activity. (Kirk, McMenemy & Poulter, 2004). One respondent in the MLA study mentioned study support sessions offered for parents at a number of their libraries. Another respondent discussed a course being run to

support parents and build confidence – this is being offered in partnership with the BBC's *Get Parenting* initiative. (BBC, 2005)

Public libraries can make use of freely available marketing material to promote their adult learning services. For example, the *Get on campaign* website (<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/get-on/>) provides marketing and information resources for organisations involved in skills for life learning. The campaign, which itself has had a particularly noticeable advertising campaign on national television provides marketing materials - such as image downloads online, as well as postcards, posters, bookmarks, post-it notes and pencils – that could help public libraries market their own adult learning services. BBC Education (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/>) has long been providing educational output for adult learners and works in conjunction with organisations such as the Basic Skills Agency, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the National Grid for Learning. The impact of the BBC in attracting people to libraries was evidenced in the *Computers Don't Bite* campaign, which encouraged learners to attend taster sessions located in their local public library (Allred and Allred, 1999). Channel 4 (<http://www.channel4.com/learning/>) has also been active in promoting public libraries, launching the 'Libraries Change Lives' initiative, a series of three-minute programmes which ran from 15-19 November 1999. The programmes used 'real' people to tell their positive experiences of visiting public libraries. "It was superb publicity.....for the role of public libraries in combating social exclusion and providing 'safe', democratic spaces for diverse communities" (Lockington, 2000, p.1). Both the BBC and Channel 4 (Channel4.com, 2005) have been actively involved in the promotion of Adult Learners Week and in particular events that are taking place in public libraries. Public libraries can take advantage of such nationally promoted campaigns, and jump on the back on such high-profile advertising promotions, using the materials to augment their own marketing activities.

Conclusions

Framework for the Future, in its vision for public library services for 2013, states that "Any adult struggling with adult basic skills can turn to a library for personalised intensive help" (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003, p.51). McNicol and Dalton (2003) explored how libraries might support the learning process - through engaging learners and targeting different audiences; planning learning experiences and strategies; helping learners to explore resources; and assisting learners with reflecting on, evaluating and implementing their learning experience. All the public library services sampled in the MLA study provide informal services for adult learners – including signposting to formal adult learning services, with respondents emphasising that these are traditional services that have always been provided by public libraries.

Whilst there is variation in the strategic plans of the public library services sampled, which largely reflect priorities dictated by external bodies, all have responded to the vision of *Framework for the Future* by planning and developing initiatives for lifelong learning generally and adult learning specifically. A wide range of courses and services is provided, some of which will have broad ranging appeal to any community and others which are geared to a particular community. The sample library services all work in partnership with other organisations to provide adult learning services, and a wide range of partners have been established. Good relationships and reciprocal arrangements have been established, going beyond provision to encompass sharing costs, sharing facilities and sharing marketing.

All library services sampled expressed the desire to provide an appropriate environment for learners – the right ambience, adequate facilities, etc. However, the poor condition of some

library buildings and lack of appropriate facilities was reported by some respondents, which can devolve to the basics of adequate funding. Nevertheless, partner organisations and other services use library space to deliver to adult learners, thus encouraging adult learners into the library environment. Furthermore, adult learning services are delivered by libraries in a variety of locations. Public libraries use a variety of methods to promote adult learning services. Whilst there is some evidence of targeting specific groups, there is also acknowledgement that any promotional method needs to be specifically targeted in order to be effective and that promotion needs to be more sophisticated and informed by market research within particular communities.

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ⁱ The Beacon council scheme was introduced by the government in 1999 as a means of achieving cultural change and raising service standards throughout local government by the sharing of best practice from identified centres of excellence.